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# Navigating Fragility: Unraveling Intergroup Relations in South Sudan's Peace-Building Process



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### Abstract


Since gaining independence in 2011, the Republic of South Sudan as the world's youngest nation has been ranked among the most fragile states. Moreover, the civil wars that erupted in 2013 and 2016 resulted in intercommunal violence and crimes against humanity, leading to an immeasurable humanitarian crisis in the region. While it still suffers from political instability, internal security challenges, and lack of economic development, the legacy of ethnic mistrust shaping the intergroup relations within South Sudanese society remains critical. Therefore, this paper seeks to understand the peace-building process in South Sudan to shed light on the stemming reasons that have kept the state-building efforts and peace-building initiatives ill-equipped. The mainstream literature often relies on investigating the functionality of governmental structures in respect to state-building initiatives, and this paper argues that the formation of a collective consciousness toward the constitution of a shared collective identity within the multiethnic society of South Sudan is one of the leading issues in question. Because war-torn South Sudan presents the prototype of a fragile state with its civil wars, armed conflicts, poverty, weak state institutions, and social inequalities, the study utilizes the conceptual framework of fragile states in order to examine the internal factors of fragility

### Keywords

Civil war · Peace-building · Collective identity · Fragile states · South Sudan



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## Navigating Fragility: Unraveling Intergroup Relations in South Sudan's Peace-Building Process

The Republic of South Sudan gained independence on July 9, 2011 following a two-decades-long conflict between the tribes from North and South Sudan. With 73.7% of its population under 30 years of age (United Nations [UN], 2023), it is the youngest sovereign state in the world. Yet, of its 12.2 million citizens, two-thirds are estimated to require humanitarian aid (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2023). This is because its peace-building efforts toward establishing functional governance structures were interrupted by outbreaks of civil wars in 2013 and 2016 that caused over 400,000 deaths and 3.9 million displaced people. South Sudan has a complex structure of contending ethnic groups. In addition to the two main rival ethnic groups (i.e., Dinka and Nuer), the country has another 62 different ethnic groups as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Contending Ethnic Groups in South Sudan*

Rank	Ethnic Group	Percentage of the Population in S. Sudan
1	Dinka	0,36
2	Nuer	0,16
3	Azande	0,06
4	Bari	0,04
5	Shilluk	0,03
6	Toposa	0,02
7	Otuha	0,02
8	Luo	0,01
9	Moru	0,01
10	Murle	0,01
11-14	Other Ethnic Groups	0,28

Source: Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, 2020

Because of South Sudan's multiethnic structure, its civil wars have mostly taken the form of ethnic conflicts subject to multiethnic genocide. The genocidal violence conveyed pre-dominantly by the state-supported Dinka ethnic group has targeted nearly all non-Dinka civilians (Pinaud, 2022).

Although the signing of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) significantly reduced the violence between the warring groups, the country still suffers from weak civilian and security institutions, massive corruption, low human capital, and poor infrastructure (Agwanda & Asal, 2020, p. 126). For instance, Transparency International (2023) ranked South Sudan as the second most corrupt country in the world. Moreover, according to Freedom House's (2023) report on freedom, South Sudan is the world's least free country. In this respect, South Sudan has never had a resistant democratic and political tradition for preserving civil liberties and political rights. Moreover, sub-national clashes among different communities, ethnopolitical tension, and rivalry between elites for



political power and financial and oil resources persist (Chagutah, 2023). Accordingly, South Sudan's complex structure of conflicting memories and diverse array of ethnic identities pose a unique challenge for reconstructing the deeply divided post-conflict society. This interrupted peace-building process in turn impedes the formation of a shared collective South Sudanese identity and reinforces the continuation of the status quo.

As the newest independent African country and its experience of ongoing intercommunal violence, South Sudan presents a unique case within the burgeoning literature of peace-building initiatives around the nexus of identity politics. Moreover, the recent influx of refugees from Sudan following the eruption of internal conflicts has worsened food insecurity and humanitarian conditions (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).

The relevant literature on South Sudan has mostly focused on the process of its establishment (Arnold & Le Riche, 2013), respective civil wars, and political crises (Johnson 2014a, 2014b, 2016; Blanchard, 2016; De Waal, 2014; Sefa-Nyarko, 2016); its resources (Bilali, 2020; Ayik et al., 2021; Ladu et al., 2021; Shankleman, 2011). Yet, its interrupted peace-building process around the nexus of identity politics and identity-building has been largely under-studied. As Pinaud (2022) put forward, scholars have interpreted the phenomena often by disregarding ethnicity, namely the identity-based causes of the conflict and failure to form a collective (political) identity at the state level. Therefore, the process of peace-building in South Sudan needs to be further investigated by critically evaluating the perspective of forming a shared collective identity. This research aims to address this gap by interpreting the South Sudanese process of peace-building through the lens of identity politics. Because South Sudan represents a critical example of state fragility through an internal armed conflict destabilizing both state functionality and citizen safety, the concept of state fragility is given specific emphasis within the peace-building process of South Sudan.

In this respect, the research contributes to the literature by employing a different standpoint of analysis, thus expanding the issue beyond the structural problems of the country. The research relies on reviewing and interpreting secondary sources, including official data from country reports and development indicators. All the relevant data are publicly available. The research will first briefly explain the conceptual framework of fragile states along the nexus of peace-building before focusing on the historical enmities within South Sudan since its establishment in order to provide the necessary background for reflecting on the impediments to constructing a functional state and on the challenges faced by the state and its citizens. After this, the study will critically assess state fragility in South Sudan by providing a rigid focus on the intergroup relations among the contending ethnic groups so as to shed light on the interconnection between the state fragility and ethnic division that have been limiting the prospective of peace-building with regard to forming a collective identity and reinforcing intercommunal trust and respect.

### **Conceptual Framework of Fragile States**

Since the end of the Cold War, Madeleine Albright and UN officials popularized the concept of state failure. Since then, the concept of a failed state has been used both in interstate agreements and various official documents. However, no scholarly agreement is found on how to define the term. Moreover, various terms such as weak, collapsed, and fragile have been used interchangeably. Because different terms imply differ-



ent types of international action, highlighting the definitional characteristics of a failed state will be noteworthy.

With regard to addressing failed states, Helman and Ratner (1993) proposed the UN conservatorship in failed states, while Kaplan (1994) highlighted the potential danger for state failure in West Africa to spread worldwide. Later, Zartman (1995, pp. 243–244) proposed the most widely accepted and encompassing definition for failed state:

*As the authoritative political system, it has legitimacy, which is therefore up for grabs, and so has lost its right to command and conduct public affairs... As a system of socio-economic organization, its functional balance of inputs and outputs is destroyed; it no longer receives support from nor exercises control over its people, and it is no longer even the target of demands because its people know that it is incapable of providing supplies. No longer functioning, with neither traditional nor charismatic nor institutional sources of legitimacy, it has lost the right to rule.*

Gross (1996, as cited in François & Sud, 2006) later provided a taxonomy of failed states by separately categorizing them as anarchic, phantom, anemic, captured, and aborted. This taxonomy noteworthy highlights the fact that each failed state has its own dynamics of failure and arising internal instabilities. Moreover, not all of these have the same degree of failure regardless of any common origin. Therefore, reflecting upon the necessity of different types of international action is critical.

Rotberg (2010) asserted failed states to have firm violent tendencies directed against the government or other political, social, or ethnic groups, as well as intercommunal enmities. The report of the State Failure Task Force (2000) highlighted the different types of internal conflicts that lead to state failure. Accordingly, internal conflicts might be triggered in different forms, such as revolutionary wars, crimes against humanity, ethnic wars, adverse regime changes, ethnic cleansing, and genocides.

While the effects of state failure were initially considered in responding to humanitarian concerns and domestic effects, since 9/11, the international community has started to recognize failed states as a security threat and viable grounds for international terrorism, international criminals, and drug and human traffickers to flourish. Therefore, the narratives communicating about failed states have shifted toward them posing dramatic dangers locally and globally. Helman and Ratner (1992) argued failed states to drag their citizens to violence and anarchy while simultaneously threatening the stability of their surroundings with warfare, economic setbacks, and refugee flows. In this vein, Carment (2003) defined failed states as breeding grounds for terrorist groups. Fukuyama (2004, p. 18) put forward that failed states pose the most critical problems for the world, from poverty to drug trafficking and terrorism:

*State collapse and weakness had already created major humanitarian and human rights disasters with hundreds of thousands of victims during the 1990s in Somalia, Haiti, Cambodia, Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor. For a while, the United States and other countries could pretend that these problems were just local, but the terrorist attacks of September 11 proved that state weakness constituted a huge strategic challenge as well.*



Such an interpretation seeing failed states as the principal problem for the international order laid the foundations for international community's motivating rationale behind international interventions. Accordingly, based on Western-style modern state approaches, taking coordinated action to eliminate the risks and incidences of state failure is widely regarded as a moral and practical responsibility. In line with the main accounts of democratic peace theory, such action has necessarily involved a liberal inspiration based on the establishment of liberal democracy and an open market economy. Therefore, peace and state-building are an inherent response to state failure and civil conflicts (Marten, 2004; Paris, 2004; Rotberg, 2010).

### **Historical Enmities of the Republic of South Sudan**

With the initiatives of the international community and Internal Authority on Development (IGAD), the signing of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement / Army (SPLM/A) ended a decades-long Sudanese war and granted autonomy to South Sudan being controlled under the rule of the SPLM/A and NCP within the Government of National Unity (GoNU). As the interim constitution, the CPA outlined the judicial, executive, and legislative agenda for the autonomy of South Sudan (Ajak et al., 2013). The parties also agreed on sharing power in four main areas; political, economic, territorial, and military. Politically, the Government of South Sudan became semi-autonomous within the ruling of GoNU (Wight, 2017). Economically, oil revenues would be split in half. Territorially, it provided for a referendum on southern secession in 2011. Lastly, it foresaw the integration of all opposition forces and other armed groups into either the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) or the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), with both forces redeploying their units to their own respective sides within their borders. However, the multiethnic composition of South Sudan would not allow intergroup peace and coexistence, because the agreement had put the Dinka-dominated SPLM/A in the ruling position and strengthened its legitimacy while marginalizing other non-Dinka ethnic groups. These marginalized groups were mainly the Nuer and Equatorian South Sudan Defense Force (SSDF). The past atrocities had originated mainly from the legacy of the Sudanese Civil War, during which the Nuer had been on the side of the Sudanese government (Climate Diplomacy.org, n.d.). Thus, this group was not regarded as a supporter of South Sudanese autonomy or its government. The power-sharing arrangements laid out by the CPA failed to eliminate these intergroup biases by ensuring equality and intergroup cohesion among the contending groups of South Sudan.

After South Sudan gained its independence following the referendum in July 2011, the intergroup competition between the Dinka and Nuer (two rival ethnic groups) became aggravated. Salva Kiir Mayardit from the Dinka ethnic group was elected president of the semi-autonomous South Sudan in 2010 and remained president following the independence of South Sudan. His vice president was Riek Machar from the Nuer ethnic group. Two years after its independence, the interethnic tension was exacerbated when Salva Kiir dismissed Riek Machar when he was accused of organizing a coup against him in 2013. Although some scholars argued that this has been mainly a political crisis in nature (Kuntzelman 2013), the tension incrementally turned into an ethnic crisis culminating in a civil war between the government and opposition forces involving the country's 64 ethnic groups as well. Confrontations started in South Sudan's capital of Juba and dramatically spread to the Upper Nile, Central Equatoria, Lakes, Unity, and Jonglei, resulting in a nationwide humanitarian, security, ethnic, and political crisis. The confrontations involved war crimes



and crimes against humanity and failed to comply with international humanitarian and human rights law. Because the warring parties targeted civilians based on their ethnic origin, the United Nations Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) in South Sudan revealed that the country to be witnessing the risk of genocide (UN Refugee Agency [UNHCR], 2016). Pinaud (2022) argued that during the Civil War of 2013, South Sudan had witnessed both genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Due to the conflict, more than 200,000 civilians have been internally displaced, while approximately 40,000 people had escaped to neighboring countries (Blanchard, 2014). In addition, more than 60,000 people sought refugees status at the UN peacekeeping bases. According to the Health in Humanitarian Crises Centre, over 300,000 people have been killed (Storeng et al., 2018). The number of civilians that fell under the emergency category regarding food insecurity has increased from 1.1 million to 3.7 million people (UN, 2018). International agencies, international responses, diplomatic interventions, and aid efforts were multilaterally formulated to resolve the conflict and alleviate the humanitarian suffering.

While the humanitarian situation incrementally deteriorated, the anti-UN sentiment and tense relations with the government, which alleges the UN to be siding with the opposition forces, have severely hindered the capacities of the UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS), which aims to provide humanitarian aid, protect civilians, and support mediation efforts. To mobilize UN efforts and resources, the UN Security Council (UNSCR, 2013) also adopted Resolution 2132 to increase the number of troops from 7,000 to 12,500 and the police personnel from 900 to 1300. This resolution also called for an opening of political dialogue and an end of hostilities (Blanchard, 2014). IGAD also assumed an active role in organizing peace talks in collaboration with the African Union (AU).

The warring parties signed a temporary ceasefire to halt military actions, and then Salva Kiir and Riek Machar started negotiations to sign a permanent ceasefire and establish a transitional government (Rolandsen et al., 2015). Following the long process of intense negotiations, the Compromise Peace Agreement was signed in August 2015 (Vhumbunu, 2016). As a result, Machar returned to Juba in April 2016 and became vice president again. Soon after his return, however, conflicts between the government and the opposition re-erupted. Although a series of cease-fires were negotiated in 2017 and 2018, both sides violated the agreements, which dramatically prolonged the humanitarian situation. Thanks to the mediation efforts of Uganda and Sudan, Kiir and Machar signed a final cease-fire through the Khartoum Declaration of Agreement in 2018, which outlined the power-sharing mechanism in the country (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). In addition, the peace agreement titled Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed in September 2018 among SPLM/A-IO, SSOA, OPPs, and the Former Detainees party (Accord.org, 2019). R-ARCSS reinstated Machar as vice president and marked the end of the conflict (Euronews, 2020). It envisaged radical reforms in public management regarding transparency, the restructuring of civil service, the reallocation of powers and resources between state and local government levels toward a sustainable federal system, and the reintegration of displaced South Sudanese people (both refugees and internally displaced), thereby facilitating national reconciliation (Liaga, 2021).

In line with Chapter 1 of the R-ARCSS, the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity of South Sudan (RTGoNU) was established in February 2020 for the purpose of forming a new transitional government that is envisaged to rule the state for a transitional period of 36 months (Gituai, 2023). The main



task of the RTGoNU has been to fully implement the articles of the R-ARCSS for the purpose of restoring lasting peace, security, and stability in South Sudan (Gituai, 2024). To this end, during the transitional period, RTGoNU is to:

1. facilitate the rehabilitation and reintegration of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees;
2. facilitate national reconciliation and national healing;
3. complete the process of making a permanent national constitution;
4. consolidate peace and stability in South Sudan;
5. undertake radical reforms and transformation regarding public finance management;
6. ensure the effective, transparent, and accountable management of national resources;
7. undertake radical civil service reforms;
8. design and implement security sector reforms;
9. rebuild and recover destroyed physical infrastructure;
10. conduct a national population and housing census;
11. and devolve powers and resources to state and local government levels.

The transitional government was led by Salva Kiir while Riek Machar was reappointed as vice president. In addition, James Wani Igga (from the SPLM), Taban Deng Gai (representing Sudan People's Liberation Movement – In Opposition; Rebecca Nyandeng De Mabior (responsible for the economy and infrastructure and representing SPLM former detainees), John Garang (responsible for the youth and gender cluster), and Hussein Abdelbagi Akol Agany (representing the South Sudan Opposition Alliance [SSOA]; Liaga, 2021). In March 2020, President Kiir appointed 35 members of the Council of Ministers as well as 10 deputy ministers. The unity government would have three area administrators, 550 members of parliament and 10 governors (Accord, 2020).

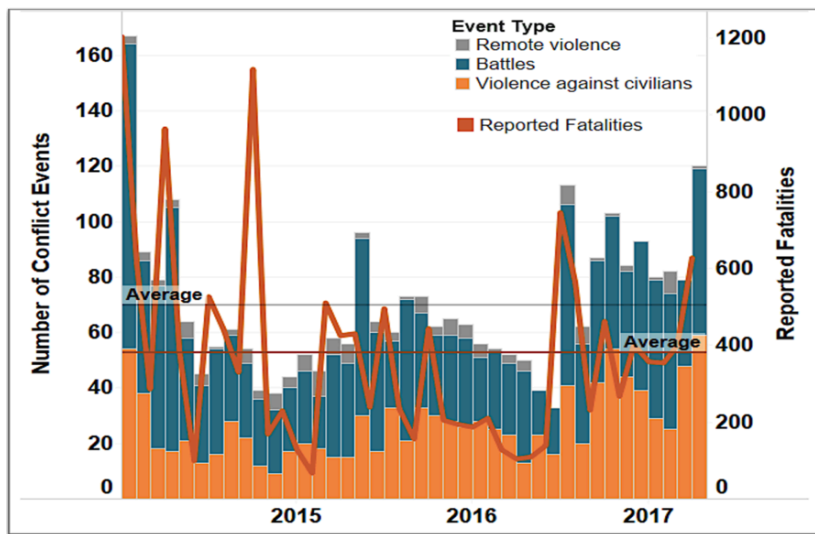
At the time of this writing, the process of RTGoNU continues, as it was extended for two years until February 2025 to allow the transition government to meet the milestones within the R-ARCSS (Gituai, 2024). Nevertheless, the threat of a conflict stemming from the incremental intercommunal violence and dire humanitarian conditions carries the urgency to provide security and meet the humanitarian needs of South Sudan's civilians. The next section will explain the current situation of state fragility in South Sudan.

### **The Current Situation of State Fragility in South Sudan**

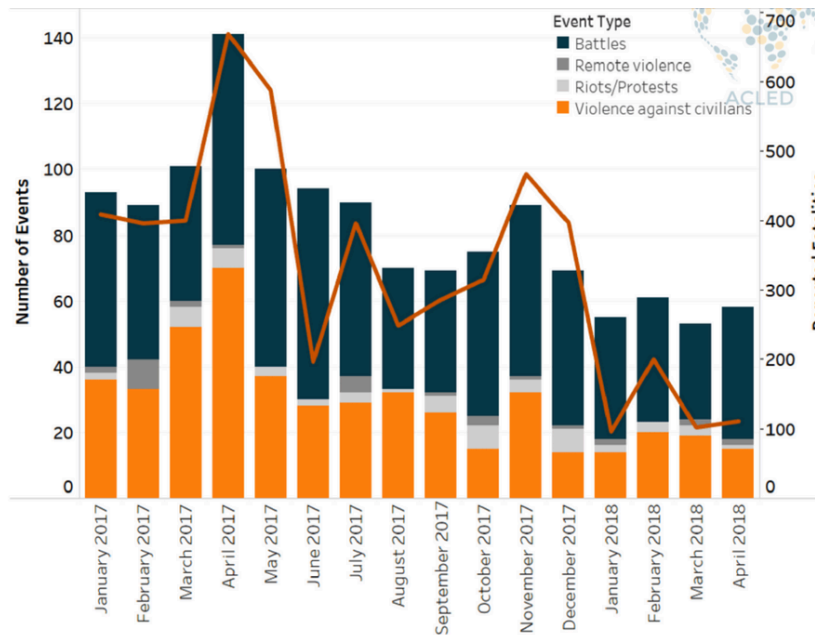
Before the signing of the R-ARCSS, the number of conflict events had been dramatically high. The intensity of conflicts between late 2014-2017 is illustrated in [Figure 1](#). Accordingly, nearly 160 conflicts were reported in 2015, while reported fatalities ranged between 1,000-1,200. As [Figure 2](#) shows, the number of conflicts in 2017 had increased 170%, implying aggravated clashes among the conflicting parties. In this respect, the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018 marked a decrease in conflict events and reported fatalities nationwide, thereby providing a process of recovery and peacebuilding in South Sudan.



**Figure 1**  
Conflict Trends in South Sudan (2014- 2017).



**Figure 2**  
Conflict Trends in South Sudan (2017-2018).



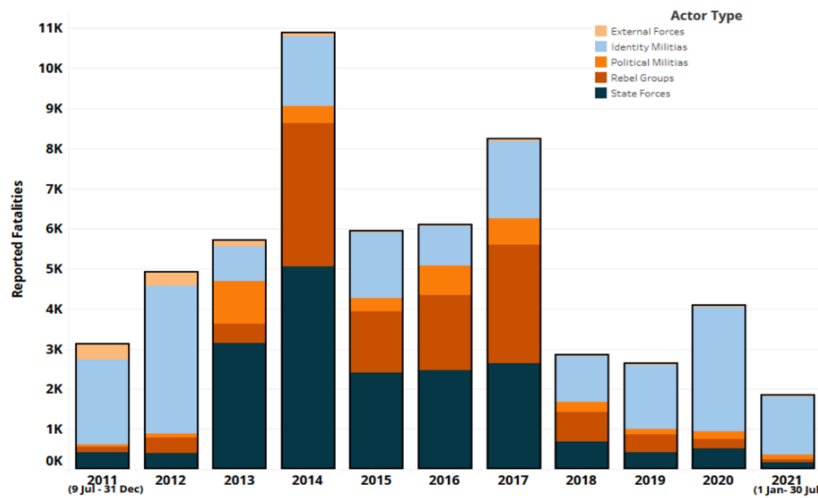
Yet, as Figure 3 shows, among the warring actor types, the identity militias were the principal actors in the rising incidents of violence while the conflicts perpetrated by the state forces, political militias and rebel groups were fading away. Accordingly, the increased ethnic militias were the principal actors culminating in persistent internal tribal divisions and interethnic and localised violence (Human Rights Council, 2021).





**Figure 3**

*Fatality aggregations in South Sudan by actor type (2011- 2021).*



The increased intercommunal conflict and tension had resulted from the power vacuum at the subnational level, stemming from the delays in the appointment of state governors (ReliefWeb, 2020). This finding shows that South Sudan is still internally divided by ethnic loyalties (Garang, 2021). It also highlights the critical role of governance structures in assuring the mitigation of interethnic enmities, revealing that unresolved power struggles can exacerbate existing enmities, which in return keep both the nation- and peace-building initiatives ill-equipped. Moreover, the traumatic genocidal legacy has remained persistent in the face of the prospective of post-conflict recovery, thus bringing the critical role of identity politics, intergroup relations, and ethnicity to the fore within the conflict analysis of South Sudan, even during the elusive peace. This reaffirms scholarly positions that approach the phenomena as an issue of ethnic or identity politics (Pinaud, 2022) while refuting the approaches that regard the issue outside of interethnic relations (Kuntzelman 2013).

In addition to local-level ethnic clashes hindering the stable functioning of governance structures, South Sudan also experiences a deep humanitarian crisis because of multiple reasons that both result from and in the state's fragility. Firstly, modest economic recovery and growth has impeded the self-sustainability of South Sudan. This has been partly due to climate change and such natural disasters as droughts and floods affecting water insecurity and economic growth. Moreover, these have also led to high numbers of displacements and fatalities. According to the World Bank's (2023) report on the South Sudan Economic Monitor, its economy has experienced stagnation due to the impacts of flooding on oil production. Secondly, Sudan's dependence on oil exportation poses critical risks to South Sudan's macroeconomic stability in the face of the eruption of Sudan's civil wars. Moreover, because of the ongoing conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) since April 2023 that have resulted in another humanitarian crisis and mass displacement in the region, South Sudan has received over 541,888 Sudanese refugees culminating in a refugee crisis in the country (Caton, 2024).

### Conclusion

This paper has investigated the peace-building process of South Sudan with a particular emphasis on intergroup relations. The article has found ethno-politics to play a vital role in shaping the current structure of



the state of South Sudan. As a result, it remains strongly susceptible to pre-existing cleavages within society political instability, as internal security challenges and lack of economic development largely stem from the legacy of ethnic mistrust that has shaped intergroup relations within South Sudanese society. While the absence of intergroup cohesion has dramatically hindered the economic and political transition, the dividing lines being based on rival identities has also strongly hindered the shared collective South Sudanese identity. In this respect, the current research argues the formation of a collective consciousness toward the constitution of a shared collective identity within the multiethnic society of South Sudan to be one of the leading issues in question. This finding and argument open a question or future research as to whether or not and the extent to which an establishment of a multiethnic party can contribute to building trust and empathy among different ethnicities.



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